

## Southern Illinois University Carbondale OpenSIUC

---

Articles

Department of Cinema and Photography

---

Winter 2006

# Who am I in this story?: On the Film Adaptations of Max Ophuls

Walter C. Metz

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, [wmetz@siu.edu](mailto:wmetz@siu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cp\\_articles](http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cp_articles)

---

### Recommended Citation

Metz, Walter C. "Who am I in this story?: On the Film Adaptations of Max Ophuls." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 34, No. 4 (Winter 2006): 285-293.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Cinema and Photography at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact [opensiuc@lib.siu.edu](mailto:opensiuc@lib.siu.edu).

**“Who Am I in This Story?”: On the Film Adaptations of Max Ophuls**  
**By Walter Metz**  
**Published in: *Literature/Film Quarterly*. 34.4 [2006]. 285-293.**

**Introduction**

The essay that you are about to read is a somewhat unusual hybrid of the conference paper I delivered at the Max Ophuls Beyond Borders (hereafter, MOBB) conference about an intertextual relationship—that between the film, *The Reckless Moment* (1949), and Henrik Ibsen’s play, *A Doll’s House* (1879)—and a more general consideration of adaptation in the films of Max Ophuls, issues I began thinking about only after having returned from the conference. I wanted to try to write the essay in this way to capture the renewal I felt at being exposed for the first time to Ophuls’ European films, and important scholars’ ideas about them. I’ve now seen a large majority of Ophuls’ available films, and believe that the intertextual approach to adaptation studies I’ve been developing ever since finishing my dissertation (“Webs of Significance,” about American film adaptations in the 1950s) has found an important case study in the adaptations directed by Ophuls.

My primary intervention in adaptation criticism has involved mediating the nasty disciplinary divide which has plagued the study of the relationship between films and novels. A literary studies environment resulted in an overwhelming concern with “fidelity studies,” a discourse about adaptation which focuses on how well the film lives up to the greatness of the novel on which it is based. Historically, as film studies as a discipline matured out of such literary studies housings, adaptation was rejected for being too tied to the parent’s apron strings. Thus, film studies began over-investing in a belief that the

greatness of the films its chose to canonize had to do with medium-specific issues (most famously, the skill of the auteur), when often times the elements from the film being highlighted were also present in the source novel as well.<sup>1</sup> As the end of this essay will make clear, I believe the latter problem is characteristic of approaches made to Ophuls' American films, especially *Caught* (1949).

However, my more recent work pushes a bit further than this, assuming that the either/or belief in the film's or the novel's superiority is limiting; I've instead argued for substituting intertextuality for adaptation as the profitable site for study when tracing the discursive relationships between films and novels. I'm interested in how two texts resonate aesthetic, narrative, and ideological material, for which the actual process of adaptation of novel into film is only one concern among many (genre and star intertextuality are two others). This is how I initially came to my MOBB conference paper's project. *The Reckless Moment*, while an adaptation of a woman's novel, Elizabeth Sanxay Holding's *The Blank Wall* (1947), I thought might be explored as an example of a text which reworks the motifs of theatrical naturalism, as present in the narrative peculiarities of *A Doll's House*. Both plots concern a woman trapped in her bourgeois home, but who is shaken out of its insularity by the actions of a blackmailer.

I'll begin with a rather global consideration of the films of Max Ophuls as adaptations of high, canonical literature that are not bound to mummifying their originals, but instead to making key filmic changes that enliven the encounter with authors like short story specialist Guy de Maupassant and playwright Arthur Schnitzler. The focus here will be on *Liebelei* (1932), made in Germany before the Nazi take-over (indeed, the

---

<sup>1</sup> I explore this issue in some detail in my article on Douglas Sirk's adaptation of *All That Heaven Allows*, "Pomp(ous) Sirk-umstance."

famous story is that it was playing on a Berlin screen as the Reichstag burned)<sup>2</sup> as well as *La Ronde* (1950) and *Le Plaisir* (1951), the first two films Ophuls made upon returning to Europe after his struggles in Hollywood. Then, I will consider how this understanding of Ophuls as a sophisticated European art film director prone to adaptations of canonical literature can possibly be made coherent with his work in Hollywood, where he was lucky to be able to direct a few films from contemporary women's novels, with only *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948; adapted from a 1922 novella by Schnitzler compatriot Stefan Zweig) standing as an obvious link to his European adaptation work.

Here is where I will conclude, considering *The Reckless Moment* as if it were an adaptation of Ibsen, a theatrical figure every bit as worthy of academic analysis as Arthur Schnitzler. Herein lies the continuity in Ophuls' films as adaptations. While Ophuls' European films' reliance on canonical literature displays a fascinating artistic meeting of the minds between great author and great filmmaker, this turns out to be as true of the American films. For the *Doll's House* motifs present in Ophuls' film are in fact derived not from Ophuls' filmmaking prowess, but from the narrative complexity of the film's source text. Much the same is true of Ophuls' noirish post-war film about neurosis and anxiety, *Caught*, based on the excellent novel, *Wild Calendar* (1946), by Libbie Block.

Thus, my main critical intervention into these adaptations is a cultural and gendered one. While I agree that the European art films, adapted from canonical literature, are beautifully complex artworks, we also need to use them as a frame for appreciating the similar complexity of the often female-authored popular culture in post-

---

<sup>2</sup> A fact that I would not have learned but for attending the conference. Throughout the paper, I will try to flag such moments, and, to the best of my ability, link them to the other papers in these proceedings.

war Hollywood that enabled Ophuls to create great films in America too, despite the very real industrial censorship he faced while working in the studio system.<sup>3</sup>

### **Towards a Definition of the “Ophuls Adaptation”**

The European films of Max Ophuls adapted from canonical literature have the rare ability to preserve the integrity of their sources, while at the same time to demonstrate their status as unique and interesting works of cinema. A case in point is the omnibus film, *Le Plaisir* (1952), adapted from three Guy de Maupassant stories. While the third of the film’s segments, “Madame Tellier’s Establishment,” is the one that has most captivated film scholars, I am more interested in the second, “The Artist’s Model,” for its approach to rendering cinematic Maupassant’s droll irony. At first glance, the segment seems patently faithful to its short story source. The film’s voice-over narrator (performed in the English version by Peter Ustinov) mimics Maupassant’s third person narration, which tells the story of a painter, Jean Summer, who was responsible for the attempted suicide of his model, Josephine.

Both Ophuls’ and Maupassant’s versions use a framing narration technique, beginning on a beach as Jean walks beside his wife, who is confined to a wheelchair. The flashback technique of both versions tells us bluntly how she got in the wheelchair. As struggling artist and model, the two were in love. However, just as Jean achieves success, the lovers begin to get on each other’s nerves. Finally exasperated, Jean tries to break up with Josephine. When Josephine threatens to throw herself out of the window, Jean tells her to do so, which she does. In the film’s climactic moment, Ophuls moves the camera

---

<sup>3</sup> In his paper, “A ‘Clear and Present Danger’ of Substantive Evil to the Community,” Steve Carr analyzes *La Ronde*—in which the meneur-de-jeu cuts out a bit of film during which two characters are having sex—as an attack on the censorship Ophuls suffered at the hands of Hollywood. Ironically, Carr argues, *La Ronde* itself was the subject of anti-Semitic censorship upon its release in the United States.

fluidly forward, simulating Josephine's ascendance of the stairs, culminating in her--the camera's, our--fall out the window, crashing through the glass window roof below.

While this scene certainly packs most of the short film's visual punch, there is an earlier scene which also indicates the complexity of Ophuls' approach to adaptation. As we watch Jean and Josephine celebrating his new-found success for the very first time, the narrator glumly tells us about their first fight. He gives his analysis of the fleeting nature of what Stendhal, in *On Love*, labels "passion-love" (11).<sup>4</sup> The narrator opines: "And that is where, in my presence, they had their first quarrel. You know how it goes, you've seen it happen. Possession is always followed by the disgust of familiarity. For a lifetime to be spent next to another being, we need not the too easy quenching of a physical passion, but a harmony of mood, of temperament and of humor." As the narrator is finishing this dirge, we dissolve to the lovers walking in the country past a lake. In front of the lovers is the narrator himself, their friend.

At first they all walk in a line, the narrator in front of Jean, with Josephine bringing up the rear. For this shot, Ophuls situates us in a place of near Brechtian alienation: we look through an enormous branch, which subtends the upper right quadrant of the image. When Josephine screams excitedly about seeing a fish jump, Jean, in a bored tone, says he saw it. When it becomes clear that he did not see the fish, Josephine scolds him for saying that he did. Continuing to witness the scene from behind a tremendous amount of shrubbery, the characters begin to triangulate, with the narrator still in the front, but now with Josephine closest to the camera, and Jean bringing up the rear. Annoyed at her singing, Jean tells her to shut up, that she "spoils the landscape." At

---

<sup>4</sup> In his DVD presentation, "Max Ophuls: A New Art (But Who Notices?)," Tag Gallagher links Stendhal's examination of love—"passion-love is 'the miracle of civilization,' the reason for being"—to Ophuls' films.

this point, they all stop, the narrator turning to look back at them. In voice-over, the narrator continues his analysis: “And so it came. The quarrel, hateful and stupid. With the usual abrupt changes of position and a degrading loss of grace, and the tears which contradict all argument.” Here we have the visual exploration of the abstract themes being explored in poetic language on the soundtrack. As the narrator is speaking from a later moment in history, the friend in the image is leading the lovers forward, toward their quarrel and the eventual death of their passion-love. Similarly, as the characters triangulate, he begins speaking of the “usual abrupt changes of position,” thus emphasizing the visual elements of the film as thematically significant. This is great filmmaking, and adaptation at its best.

The insistence on the doomed failure of passion-love at this moment of *Le Plaisir* is what links it to the other film adaptations by Ophuls. In particular, this moment resonates with films adapted from the work of turn-of-the-century playwright Arthur Schnitzler. Ophuls’ version of Schnitzler’s *Liebelei* [*Flirtation*] (1895) ends with a duel between the central protagonist, Fritz, and his lover’s husband, Baron Eggersdorf. Thus, the fallout from an emotionless love extinguishes the flame of the true passion-love shared by Fritz and his girlfriend, Christine. As with “The Artist’s Model,” *Liebelei* ends with Christine’s death by suicidal defenestration; she is heart-broken by Fritz’s death in the duel with Baron Eggersdorf.

The scene in “The Artist’s Model” in which Josephine sees the fish jumping resonates with a film adaptation of Schnitzler, this time not by Max Ophuls but instead Stanley Kubrick. *Eyes Wide Shut*, adapted from Schnitzler’s novella, “Dream Story,” begins with a moment in which Alice sits on the toilet while her husband Bill gets

dressed to go to a party. As she wipes herself, she asks how her hair looks. Bill replies that it looks fine, but she, like Josephine before her, remarks that “You’re not even looking at it.” Whereas Jean refused to look at the lake, Bill looks at his wife’s hair, thus averting, albeit only temporarily, the threat desire poses to marriage, because marriage chokes passion-love in the world of Schnitzler, no matter what.<sup>5</sup>

It is with *La Ronde*, Ophuls’ 1950 adaptation of the 1903 play by Schnitzler, however, with which I would like to build a theory of Ophuls and adaptation. As with *Le Plaisir* and *Liebelei*, Ophuls maintains a detailed respect for the source text, while inventing a cinematic mode for the delivery of that text’s narrative and ideological material. *La Ronde* offers one of the great adaptational inventions in the history of the cinema, Anton Walbrook as the meneur-de-jeu, a trans-diegetic figure who, like the narrator in “The Artist’s Model,” weaves in and out of role of narrator and character participant.

In the film’s tour-de-force opening, the meneur-de-jeu asks, “Who am I in this story?” as he first walks through a stage with 19<sup>th</sup> century candle footlights and then a modern film set. Embracing the artifice, the meneur-de-jeu establishes a more specific location: “We are in Vienna, in 1900.” As he changes costume, he emphasizes the historical importance of this--“we are in the past”--a past which moves back across the recent trauma of World Wars II and I. His historical analysis of this is precise: “I like the past. It’s more restful than the present, more predictable than the future.” As birds chirp

---

<sup>5</sup> Given the close similarities between Kubrick and Ophuls—use of camera movement, obsession with the death of passion-love, interest in the past as a marker of human failure—I am surprised more intertextual work has not been done in this area. The duels which end *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Liebelei*, and *The Earrings of Madame de* (1953), for example, scream out as frames through which to read the duel which ends Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon* (1975).



happily in the background, he discovers a carousel of love, which will turn through ten stories in rapid succession.

The meneur-de-jeu introduces each of the ten love affairs, each of which culminate in sex, the next one always involving one of the participants from the previous. In the 10<sup>th</sup> story, the film comes full circle, with the prostitute who had sex with the soldier in the first story now having sex with a count.

The opening of *La Ronde* establishes three motifs which I would like to use to define Max Ophuls as an artist of film adaptation. First, Ophuls overlays the narrative material with a modernist film style which comments on the character's activities using various forms of direct address. In *La Ronde*, this involves the self-reflexive opening of the film, with its meditation on the various mediated presentations—theatre, film—of stories about love. While the meneur-de-jeu opening of the film is an Ophuls invention, Schnitzler's play, with its 10 fragmented scenes, anticipating the Epic Theatre of Brecht, is certainly a modernist play. However, this is not true of the Maupassant stories adapted for *Le Plaisir*. And yet, Ophuls invents a much more aggressive narrational system than used by the classical Maupassant, as in the camera movement which depicts Josephine's suicide and the narrator's ironic intervention during the quarelling scene at the lake. Thus, at the aesthetic level, Ophuls' adaptations use modernist stylistic practices to unify disparate—Maupassant's classicism and Schnitzler's modernism—material.

Secondly, the opening of *La Ronde* demonstrates that Ophuls' film adaptations feature a narrative analysis of romantic love. As the metaphor of the carousel of passion indicates, one's ride is dizzying, yet must eventually come to an end. This is best illustrated later in *La Ronde*, as a young man comes to visit Emma, a married woman.

They are about to have sex, when suddenly, we cut to the meneur-de-jeu working frantically on the broken carousel. The young man's inability to get an erection precipitates a conversation in bed about Stendhal. A story about a cavalry officer who did not have sex, but instead cried, with his lover, results in the young man getting an erection. We cut back to the narrator, having fixed his carousel. This comic moment illustrates, not only erectile dysfunction, but also the antithetical relationship between physical sex acts and passion-love between men and women. These motifs are consistent across the works of Ophuls, as we've seen in the narrator's analysis of the break-up of Jean and Josephine. Passion-love is fleeting, ruined by intimacy and familiarity.

Finally, the opening of *La Ronde* indicates an ideological component to the Ophuls adaptation. Here, we have a meditation on the nature of history, always subtended by the violence of the World Wars, but also housing brief moments where people might try to find an interconnectedness that transcends suffering. As the artwork of a Jewish exile, Ophuls' post-war films are haunted by a lost Europe. The retreat to 1900 Vienna in *La Ronde* is one example of this, but these considerations pertain to Ophuls' American films as well, perhaps most famously in the Hale's Tour scene in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. This scene, in which Stefan takes Lisa on an amusement ride which simulates train rides across Europe, ends with the operator of the ride saying, "we have no more countries left," to which Stefan replies, "we'll do them all again, then." "We'll revisit the scenes of our youth!," enthuses Stefan. Here, the film self-consciously presents a romanticized Europe which no longer exists, certainly not in 1947, when the destruction of Europe would have been so physically present in reality, even if so thoroughly elided by the film.

While Ophuls' adaptations of the work of Maupassant and Schnitzler in his European art films is more celebrated, I believe (as my invocation of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* indicates) that my definition of the Ophuls adaptation also applies to his American films, as the case of *Caught* will demonstrate.

The novel, *Wild Calendar*, from which *Caught* is adapted, is almost never discussed in the criticism of Ophuls' film. As Lutz Bacher demonstrates in his discussion of the film's production history (205-216), the film's many screenplay drafts drifted further and further from the plot details of Block's novel. For example, the film's Lower East Side pediatrician, Dr. Quinada (played by James Mason), with whom Leonora begins a relationship after leaving Smith Ohlrig, is barely recognizable when one reads the source novel. There, Maud, the Leonora character, does marry Sonny Quinada after her disastrous relationship with Smith, but the plot takes place in Denver where Quinada is a hotel manager.

With *Caught*, therefore, we are confronting for the first time, an Ophuls adaptation which strays very far from the details of its source. I would like to consider this more carefully than just emphasizing the industrial impacts of censorship in ruining Ophuls' film, or suggesting that Ophuls was able to make a great film--"Ophuls' *Citizen Kane*," as Susan White puts it (241)--by transcending the impoverished women's novel material of its source. I certainly believe *Caught* to be a wonderfully complex film, but I want to emphasize that Libbie Block's *Wild Calendar* is also a wonderfully accomplished novel.

*Caught* fits well within my definition of the Ophuls adaptation. Its chiaroscuro lighting creates a noirish space of anxiety which haunts Leonora and Smith Ohlrig,

linking back to noir's importations of modernism in American cinema via German Expressionism and *Citizen Kane*.

Since industrial circumstances ripped the film so far away from the source novel, one would need to perform a parallel analysis of *Wild Calendar*. The fact of the matter is, that regardless of the institutional constraints, Ophuls saw something in the novel which would allow him to make a film worth his time. In terms of modernist aesthetics, the narration is purely classical, telling us the story of Leonora Eames from within her point-of-view. In this sense, the novel is like "The Artist's Model," a classical narrative adapted by Ophuls using modernist techniques, this time Expressionist lighting instead of ironic narration.

The theme of the doomed nature of passion-love is also explored. While in *Wild Calendar*, Smith Ohlrig is a reasonably well-adjusted husband,<sup>6</sup> in *Caught*, he is, especially as played by Robert Ryan, a completely obsessive psychopath, going so far as to lock Leonora in her room to keep her from leaving him. While the failed relationship in *Caught* is more licentious and dysfunctional than the staid *fin-de-siecle* ones in *La Ronde*, its precursor can be traced to the bitterness of the Fritz/Baroness affair in *Liebelei*.

It is with the ideological interest in history and the meanings of the past that the *Wild Calendar/Caught* nexus becomes fascinating from an adaptation studies perspective. For, if *La Ronde* and *Letter from an Unknown Woman* are haunted by the relationship between past and present, it is unexpectedly *Wild Calendar* that is more "Ophulsian" than *Caught*. Whereas *Caught* rips its storyline out of any discernible historical context, *Wild Calendar* is a brilliant popular novel which interrogates the relationship between popular

---

<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that *Wild Calendar*'s Smith is "normal." He has a particularly close relationship with his brother (the character's function in *Caught* is fulfilled by Franzi, Ohlrig's personal assistant), the oddness of which was enough to cause the censors in Hollywood to delete him from the script.

memory and public history. Beginning on June 28, 1929, the first book of the three book novel is situated within the provincial life of the inhabitants of Denver, Colorado. This is the date of marriage of Dr. Ferdinand Wicker, the dentist who was also the first man Maud Eames (Leonora Ames in *Caught*) ever kissed. The first book chronicles Maud's obsession with this seemingly devastating event in her life. As Book Two begins, in July 1929, she has met Smith Ohlrig, a wealthy businessman. Their marriage is enabled by the stock market crash of October 1929. As Smith's brother didn't believe in stocks, the Ohlrigs are able to weather the Depression in ways other characters in the novel are not. Book Three chronicles Maud's second marriage, to hotel manager Sonny Quinada, after the break-up of her doomed marriage to Smith. Beginning in 1937, and ending in November 1941 (that is, on the brink of American involvement in World War II), this section of the novel traces Europe's fall to Fascism through the prism of Maud's experiences in Denver. Significantly, as a naïve young woman, she had met and admired an Italian Fascist who came to visit Denver, but the end of the novel reveals Maud to have matured in her assessment of the world.

The novel's narrative conceit, the wild calendar, is to juxtapose the domestic lives of the characters in Denver with the specific dates of history between 1929 and 1941. For example, Chapter 13, "Autumn and Winter, 1929," chronicles the crash of the stock market. In Chapter 23, "September 1940 to May 1941," which details the temporary break-up of Maud's marriage to Sonny Quinada (because she has been taking money from Smith Ohlrig to try to finance the buying of Sonny and Maud's own hotel), these events are linked to the onset of World War II. As a result of her treachery, Sonny enlists in the armed forces and goes to Europe to fight fascism. Before he leaves, Sonny makes

the following claim about Maud: “I wish you had dreamed of being a movie star the way some women do, or of marrying a millionaire, or of being a North Pole explorer. You dreamed of being an average woman happily married. It sounds so reasonable. I’ll bet to himself even Hitler sounds reasonable” (334). At first, this connection between Maud the housewife and Hitler the genocidal lunatic sounds ridiculous. However, the novel uses such gestures in a way that I find compelling, relying on the nature of melodrama to makes global experiences personal. While Maud is clearly not Hitler, she does learn by the end of the novel not to act as if the whole world revolves around her perceptions, something that characterizes Hitler’s monomania.

I’ve hoped to demonstrate in this brief adaptational analysis of the *Wild Calendar-Caught* interface the power of a discursive approach to adaptation that cares little for the aesthetic superiority of one medium over the other. Using my definition of the Ophuls adaptation as my frame, I believe *Caught* is a fascinating film in terms of noir aesthetics and the thematic analysis of passion-love. However, *Wild Calendar* is worthy of attention in its own right, particularly in terms of its aggressive attempt to represent the melodramatics of history in the interwar period.

As one final example of the complexity of this site, it turns out that the *Citizen Kane* intertext in *Caught* is grounded in the source novel, *Wild Calendar*. Late in the novel, long after his divorce from Maud, Smith Ohlrig comes back to Denver to see their son, Jeremy. He stops for a while to talk with Maud, as a friendship still exists between them. The narrator explains: “Their conversation at first was happily inconsequential. They spoke of priorities, and *Citizen Kane*, even of the summer’s silk-stockings panic. Smith could be depended on to be interested in such trivia. Their voices fell, blended,

braided. When one stopped the other began; their words were soothing and ceaseless as water” (344). Why a novel written in 1946, five years after the ill-fated release of *Citizen Kane*, would have Welles’ film as one of two movie references (the other, more appropriately is the melodrama, *Stella Dallas*), is not immediately apparent. However, if *Caught* can be “Ophuls’ *Citizen Kane*”--for reasons having to do with aesthetics (chiaroscuro lighting) and narrative (rich madman locking helpless wife into mansion)--then *Wild Calendar* can be Libbie Block’s *Citizen Kane*, for reasons having to do with history and ideology. For *Citizen Kane* relates to *Wild Calendar* in its historiography: both narratives take the life of an American (Kane albeit a more “important” one), and explore that character’s personal life within the backdrop of the history of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. This is the sort of adaptation criticism I am forwarding, one that takes great literature, great films, popular literature, and popular films as equally important articulations of textual and historical meaning.

### **The Europeanization of Post-war American Popular Culture**

It is an historical commonplace to assert the transformation of American culture by European influences in the post-war period. Most obviously, the arrival of European émigrés to the United States transformed psychology because of the Freudian psychoanalytic methods they brought with them. Similarly, in the film industry, émigré artists brought a different way of seeing the world. Despite being offered conventional American popular literature as source material, such artists transformed it visually using European aesthetic traditions. For example, the importation of Brechtian modernism into the America cinema can be seen in the 1950s melodramas of Douglas Sirk.

The final gesture of my paper proposes to study such cultural transformation by examining *The Reckless Moment* by Max Ophuls, another émigré from Europe who made a series of genre films for the Hollywood studios in the post-war period. This final move will examine *The Reckless Moment*'s relationship to its women's novel source, Elizabeth Saxnay Holding's *The Blank Wall*, first published in the October 1947 issue of *The Ladies Home Journal*. Similar to my analysis of the *Citizen Kane* intertext in *Caught* and *Wild Calendar*, I will argue that *The Blank Wall* and *The Reckless Moment*'s unifying intertext is naturalist theatre, in the guise of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. This methodology completes my theoretical construction of an intertextual adaptation studies, because it reveals that the seemingly direct relationship between source text and film is merely one form of discursive influence. There's no reason that *A Doll's House* cannot be every bit as important of an intertext for analyzing the potential meanings of *The Reckless Moment*, the title card announcing that the film is based on a novel by Ms. Holding notwithstanding.

There are three central connections between *The Reckless Moment* and *A Doll's House*. First, each narrative concerns a central female protagonist—Lucia and Nora, respectively—who is blackmailed for committing a crime in order to protect her family. In *A Doll's House*, the blackmail takes the form of Krogstad's note. In *The Reckless Moment*, Lucia murders her daughter's suitor, Darby, which she covers up when Donnelly blackmails her with the love letters Bea has previously written to Darby.

Secondly, both narratives are set at Christmastime, producing an ironic sheen around stories of the male threat to female domestic space. Thirdly, the male blackmailer drops the threat because he falls in love: Krogstad falls in love with Christine in *A Doll's*



*House*; Donnelly falls in love with the transgressor Lucia herself in *The Reckless Moment*.

Such plot equivalences of course lead to observations about the distinctions between the texts. First, the ending of *The Reckless Moment* features Lucia, imprisoned by the bars of the staircase, as she talks with her husband, working in Berlin, on the telephone. *A Doll's House* ends oppositely, with the famous discussion between Nora and Torvald ending in Nora slamming the door in Torvald's face as she leaves in search of her liberation from patriarchy.

How can we account for such a radical difference? Ophuls' text is historically forged out of the trauma of World War II, told from the point of view of an American family besieged by a distinctly European threat. In "The Whiteness of Film Noir," Eric Lott captures this well when he refers to the ethnic whiteness of Donnelly's and Nagle's Irishness in contrast to the WASP-y whiteness of the Harper family.

Such a tension in nationality and ethnicity is not a concern in Ibsen's play, but crucially, can be seen in American expatriate filmmaker Joseph Losey's 1973 film version of *A Doll's House*, a film which pits a very distinctly American Jane Fonda as Nora against a British David Warner as Torvald. By fleeing America for Europe, Losey has reversed the path of Ophuls, Sirk, Wilder, and many other Jewish film artists who fled a self-destructing Europe, bringing to bear the traumatic effects of their experiences onto the space of the American melodrama. Such trauma is at play in Sirk (as eloquently explored by Laura Mulvey in her essay, "It Will Be a Magnificent Obsession"), in the Hale's Tour scene in Ophuls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, and at the end of *The*

*Reckless Moment*: while Tom Harper is building bridges in rubble Berlin, the Europeans--Donnelly and Nagle--are threatening to destroy his American home.<sup>7</sup>

Similar to Losey's film, *The Reckless Moment* accomplishes its depiction of European/American tensions largely through casting. In particular, the star intertextuality of James Mason as Donnelly takes priority. Mason's never diegetically explained British presence in American post-war melodramas—from *The Reckless Moment* to *A Star is Born* (1954) to *Lolita* (1962)—provides a ready-made signifier of moral decay. In the best line in the film, Mason's thick Irish accent contrasts Lucia's life of American normalcy with his own shackling by the sleazy ethnic underworld: "You have your family, I have my Nagle," suggesting, at the very least, some odd slippage between phallus and national identity. While Donnelly thoroughly enjoys spending as much time as he can with Lucia's family, Lucia is horrified at the thought of seeing Donnelly's Nagle.

In stark contrast to *The Reckless Moment*'s bleak pessimism about the American family stands Mason's most intriguing performance in post-war American melodrama, as Ed Avery in Nicholas Ray's *Bigger Than Life* (1956). Again, Mason's Britishness poses a threat to the American family, this time because he is a cortisone junkie, but here, the maps and tourist posters that dominate the mise-en-scene of the American home posit a possibility, albeit heavily ironized, that Europe holds out an opportunity for adventure that bourgeois existence in the United States has denied him.

Whereas Europe represents hope in *Bigger Than Life*, it is a Europe of traumatized loss that haunts the American films of Max Ophüls. The Europe referred to

---

<sup>7</sup> At the MOBB conference, William Paul, in his paper, "Off the Deep End Far From Heaven: Social Topography in *The Reckless Moment*," performed a fascinating reading of the opening moments when Lucia has to drive her car across the bridge to go meet Darby in sleazy Los Angeles.

here is a different one; it has been lost to Nazi barbarism. The specter of European trauma haunts Ophuls' films, although it's worth noting that this is true even before World War II. At the end of *Liebelei*, after the duel has killed Fritz and Christine has defenestrated herself, we see shots of a snow-covered landscape, entombing the characters in loss. This is especially poignant, because the moment echoes the film's most jubilant sequences, when Fritz and Christine rode a horse-drawn sleigh through this space, in love and with the future laying before them.<sup>8</sup> However, just because war trauma resonates in Ophuls' interwar films does not make the trauma-based analysis of his American films any less valid. In other areas—French 1920s Surrealism and 1950s Existentialism—we can see ways in which post-war traumas from the two wars are related, yet take different forms. I believe that Ophuls films, always eschatological in orientation, perhaps because of the Jewishness of their filmmaker, or perhaps for reasons of the instability of exile, nonetheless represent war trauma in different ways before and after World War II.

After World War II, the films see Europe from a distance, as a lost lifeless realm. This contrasts with *Liebelei*, where the camera is in the midst of things at the traumatic conclusion. In the post-war films, Europe is represented as a phantasmatic illusion, perhaps the best example of which is the Hale's Tour scene from *Letter from an Unknown Woman* previously analyzed. However, such an illusory Europe is also a major part of *La Ronde*, significantly Ophuls' first film upon returning to the Europe so devastated by World War II. The narrator of *La Ronde* believes that going back to 1900 Vienna, before the devastation of both wars, is a necessary, protective gesture.

---

<sup>8</sup> In an intriguing exchange at the MOBB conference, Miriam Hansen analyzed this moment as one haunted by death because of its setting in a graveyard.

The specter of European trauma haunts *The Reckless Moment* as much as it does any of these other Ophuls films. Its return to the structure of 1879's *A Doll's House*, is, I believe, a less obvious yet equally pointed ironic engagement with how and why turn-of-the-century Europe offers a seemingly less dangerous and more hopeful space for characters to inhabit.

As one example of such trauma in *The Reckless Moment*, consider the moment when Lucia, having exhausted all of the most respectable options, goes to a pawnshop downtown to raise the needed blackmail money for Donnelly and Nagle. Leaving her middle-class suburb, Lucia confronts a horrifying city whose downtown is rendered hysterically threatening. The sequence begins after Lucia has been rebuffed from using her jewelry as collateral for a loan at a sleazy loan company. A prim white woman denies her request.

A dissolve to an absurdly busy mise-en-scene on a downtown street follows. Anxious music on the soundtrack accompanies the first shot of the street, which is filmed over the left shoulder of a man in a Navy uniform getting a shoe shine. In the middle-ground, and center of the image, is a police officer directing traffic. We cut to a long shot of Lucia crossing the street and walking down the sidewalk with a horrified, revulsed look on her face. As the camera tracks into medium shot, she pauses in front of a bald man with his hand in his pockets. He leers at her threateningly, as she continues walking down the street. After passing two more men in sailors' uniforms loitering about in a shop's alcove, we cut to inside the pawnbroker's equally dense shop, which Lucia enters. The pawnbroker begins humming; after he looks at the jewels, he shuts the case they're

in and eyes Lucia so suspiciously that she is forced to chime in, “It’s mine.” The pawnbroker continues humming as he locks himself behind his cage.

After getting \$800 from the pawnbroker, Lucia rushes out of the shop, almost forgetting her receipt. We cut to the long shot position outside on the street again, as Lucia walks back up the street she just walked down a few minutes before. The loitering sailor is now out of his alcove and much closer to the pawnshop: Lucia passes this malingerer first. Lucia walks much faster leaving than she did coming, and the camera must track right faster than it tracked left. Given the cars in the extreme foreground being passed, this gives the viewer a disorienting feeling that usefully matches Lucia’s feelings of despair. The bald leerer cranes his neck at Lucia as she pushes her way through the crowd. Lucia tries to cross the street, but the policeman yells her back onto the curb; she’s almost been hit by a car. The scene dissolves to Lucia at the station where she is to meet Donnelly.

The pawnbroker scene is thus framed by a hysterical depiction of the city of Los Angeles, dirty and filled with no-good-nicks, where threats seem ready to lurch out at Lucia at any moment. Within the pawnbroker’s shop, however, things seem relatively calm. It is only intertextually that we can see how the meaning of the pawnbroker’s shop is situated within the European/American tensions brought to light via *A Doll’s House*. Consider the pawnbroker scene from *The Reckless Moment* in reference to a more obvious critique of the American suburban family and its ignorance of European trauma, as articulated at the beginning of Sidney Lumet’s *The Pawnbroker* (1965).

The film begins with concentration camp survivor Sol (played by Rod Steiger) sitting in a suburban backyard, being browbeaten by his sister-in-law. She wants Sol to

pay for the family to go on vacation to Europe. As his sister-in-law speaks, Sol reminisces about his wife in a field shortly before the Nazis came to take them to the camp. The sister-in-law invokes the trauma of history, reflecting on the fact that next Thursday is the 25 year anniversary of her sister's death. As her daughter's pop music plays in the background, she laments in a banal tone: "What happens to the time?" The sister-in-law tries to sell the trip to Sol: "The shrines, the cities, there's an atmosphere we don't have here." Her husband chimes in from the backyard deck, "Why you can almost smell the difference," to which Sol responds with deadpan delivery: "It's rather like a stink, if I remember." On this, the film cuts to its credit sequence, with a jazzy score, featuring Sol driving to a depressed area of Harlem, where his pawnshop is located.

In both his sister-in-law's intrusion into the pawnbroker's traumatic memories, and Lucia's incursion into the pawnshop in *The Reckless Moment*, I see an activation of the nexus between femininity, Jewishness, and authorship that Susan White studies across the corpus of Ophuls' European films, particularly *The Earrings of Madame De*. White argues:

[T]hroughout Ophuls' works the woman who produces only repetitive and prevaricating stories, like the jeweler who only accumulates the profits of an artificially inflated exchange value, or the filmmaker who creates only obsessively repetitive works that concentrate on selling the woman's image—all are included with the prostitute and (covertly) the Jew in the 'scandalous' group representing the realm of exchange divorced from that of production. (38)

Significantly for my argument here about the Ophuls text, the pawnshop scene is sanitized in Schott McGehee's and David Siegel's remake of *The Reckless Moment*, *The Deep End* (2001). While Tilda Swinton ups the ante on Joan Bennett's performance of repressed whiteness, and the city (now Reno, Nevada instead of Los Angeles) continues

to threaten, it is now a cleaned-up, non ethnically-threatening space. Shot in color—*The Reckless Moment* and *The Pawnbroker* are both black-and-white films—*The Deep End*'s pawnbroker scene is shot bathed in the light of a sunny day. The younger and not Jewish pawnbroker in Reno gruffly makes the exchange of money for jewelry with the Lucia character (now renamed Margaret Hall). A shock cut has a truck almost running over Margaret outside on the street, thus using a suspense tactic to replace the motif of the city itself as threatening which is characteristic of *The Reckless Moment*, and, to a lesser extent, *The Pawnbroker*. The trauma represented by European history, which haunts *The Reckless Moment*, which “stinks” in Steiger’s pawnbroker’s Imaginary, is now replaced by the dreamy beauty of Goran Visjnic, whose Serbo-Croatian intertext is certainly of interest, but of a different order of historical engagement than Donnelly’s Irishness. Such a cleaning up is consistent with *The Deep End*'s larger project, the major manifestation of which is the deletion of the African-American maid Sybil, an empowered character, indeed Lucia’s only ally in *The Reckless Moment*, and a powerful one at that. In the structure of mobility of post-war film noir, when Donnelly dies in a fiery car crash, Sybil takes charge and drives Lucia’s car home, when Lucia is emotionally unable to do so herself.

The analysis thus far has assumed that *The Reckless Moment* is a purely and simply an Ophuls text. Given the nature of my intertextual connection of *The Reckless Moment* and *A Doll’s House*, it is worth concluding with an assessment of the film’s source, Elisabeth Saxnay Holding’s women’s novel, *The Blank Wall*. *The Deep End* eschews Ophuls altogether, merely announcing itself as an adaptation of Holding’s novel.

Given McGehee's and Siegel's mastery of race and the noir tradition in their avant-garde masterpiece, *Suture*, this is puzzling indeed.

Two connections between Holding's novel and my reading of Ophuls' film are crucial. First, *The Blank Wall* is thoroughly, and perhaps more explicitly than Ophuls' film, engaged with *A Doll's House*. When the novel's Lucia comes to grips with her entrapment by domestic life, she speaks of herself as a doll, mimicking Nora's realizations in Act III of Ibsen's play. During Nora's final discussion with Torvald, she critiques her father's construction of his daughter as doll-like: "He called me his little doll baby, and he played with me the way I played with my dolls" (40). Nora connects this with Torvald's treatment of her: "But our home has never been more than a playroom. I have been your doll wife here, just the way I used to be Daddy's doll child. And the children have been my dolls" (40).

Compare this to Lucia's panicked reflection on her own life in Holding's novel: "Was she, then, a creature uniquely favored? Or was she a creature, not favored, but scorned and dismissed by life, denied what other people had. . . . I'm like a doll, she thought, I'm not real. As she sat at dinner with her family, this sense of unreality became almost frightening" (144). Lucia similarly disconnects from marriage, using the doll metaphor, like Nora, to understand that process as well. While trying to write her husband Tom a letter, and remembering a day at the beach they shared together as young newlyweds, Lucia reflects: "It had been a special day, specially happy, but it evoked no feeling in her now. That young, happy Tom and Lucia were no more than bright little dolls" (208).



Secondly, Lucia's self-realization comes in the chapter specifically devoted to Sybil's backstory. In even more radical a fashion than Ophuls, Holding foregrounds Lucia's ignorance of Sybil's private life. If this were a film, this passage would be more apropos of the revelation of Annie's private life at the end of Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959) than anything in Ophuls. Holding reveals to us that Sybil's husband was unjustly jailed for eight years for assaulting a restaurant owner who "refused to serve any niggers." Such an assault on the tensions between justice and law resonates with Holding's Lucia's encounter with a police detective, a scene which in turn directly reworks Krogstad's encounter with Nora in Act II of Ibsen's play. During the encounter, Krogstad indicts Nora's naïve belief in the fairness of the law. Krogstad asserts: "The law doesn't ask about motives." Nora replies, "Then it's a bad law." Krogstad lectures her: "Bad or not—if I produce this note in court, you'll be judged according to the law" (23).

This analysis of *The Reckless Moment* encompasses three strategies I have used to build an intertextual adaptation studies. First, film genre studies (prominent, for example, in James Naremore's excellent work on film noir), has worked to establish the influence of literary Naturalism on American post-war cinema. An awareness of Ibsen's influence on Ophuls gives Naturalism a different voice than Emile Zola for tracking such a connection. Secondly, questions of high and low culture are rendered more complex by tracing a line from Ibsen to Ophuls. Certainly, I have applied Ibsen to American melodrama, but again perhaps the American melodrama has been rendered high culture again by the auteur status of Ophuls in film studies. The invocation of Holding's novel, however, refutes such a gesture, insisting on the importance of *The Ladies Home Journal* as a site where important cultural analysis can be found. This resonates, for example,

with the work on women's magazines done by Susan Ohmer. Thirdly, I have argued that European World War II trauma can be traced in American post-war film texts. Such work emphasizes that the encounter between European émigrés and post-war American culture, theoretically well-known in the work of the Frankfurt School sociologists, has only begun to be delved into in terms of post-war popular cinema's encounters with trauma, subjectivity, and history.

### **Works Cited**

- Bacher, Lutz. *Max Ophuls in the Hollywood Studios*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1996.
- Block, Libbie. *Wild Calendar*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946.
- Holding, Elisabeth Sanxay. *The Blank Wall*. *The Ladies Home Journal* [October 1947]. 37-223.
- . *The Blank Wall*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947.
- Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. *Modern Drama: Selected Plays from 1879 to the Present*. Ed. Walter Levy. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999.
- Lott, Eric. "The Whiteness of Film Noir." *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Mike Hill. New York: New York UP, 1998.
- Maupassant, Guy de. "The Artist's Model." *Selected Stories*. Vol. 1. Ed. and Trans. Dora Knowlton Ranous. New York: Leslie-Judge, 1912.
- Metz, Walter. "Webs of Significance: Intertextual and Cultural Historical Approaches to Cold War American Film Adaptations." Ph.D. Dissertation. U. of Texas at Austin. August 1996.
- . "Pomp(ous) Sirk-umstance: Intertextuality, Adaptation, and *All That Heaven Allows*." *Journal of Film and Video*. 45.4 [Winter 1993]. 3-21.
- Mulvey, Laura. "It will be a magnificent obsession." *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*. Eds. Jackie Bratton et. al.

Ohmer, Susan. "Female Spectatorship and Women's Magazines: Hollywood, *Good Housekeeping*, and World War II." *The Velvet Light Trap*. 25 [Spring 1990]. 53-68.

Schnitzler, Arthur. *La Ronde: A Play in Ten Dialogues*. *Arthur Schnitzler: Four Major Plays*. Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 1999.

---. *Liebelei: A Play in Three Acts*. *Arthur Schnitzler: Four Major Plays*. Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 1999.

Stendhal. *On Love*. Trans. Philip Sidney Woolf et. al. Mount Vernon: Peter Pauper P, n.d.

White, Susan M. *The Cinema of Max Ophuls: Magisterial Vision and the Figure of Woman*. New York: Columbia UP, 1995.

Zweig, Stefan. "Letter from an Unknown Woman." *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. Ed. Virginia Wright Wexman. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1986.